

# Applying the Disaster Risk Management Cycle to the Syrian humanitarian crisis



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**The current humanitarian situation engulfing Syria and surrounding countries is an incredibly complex situation and, in evaluating it, localized information and understanding is central. However, in understanding such significant emergencies, there is also a role for generalizable frameworks. In this article, I argue that the humanitarian response in and around Syria, both now and in the coming years, can be usefully analysed using a diagrammatic framework developed in my work on Disaster Risk Management.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I will be focusing on how the concepts used for the Disaster Risk Management Cycle (DRMC) are potentially useful for understanding current and future challenges in Syria.**

## Overview of Syrian Humanitarian Crisis

The most succinct snapshot of the humanitarian situation within Syria comes from the fortnightly OCHA Humanitarian Bulletin,<sup>2</sup> with the refugee situation best described in the Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal.<sup>3,4</sup> By the beginning of October 2013, in addition to the death of over 100,000 people<sup>5</sup>:

- There were over 2.1 million refugees in surrounding countries, mainly Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt;
- There were over 6.8 million people in need within Syria itself, including 4.25 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs);
- Of the USD 3 billion required for the current external Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP), 49% was funded;<sup>6</sup>
- Of the USD 1.4 billion required for the complementary Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) within Syria, 55% was funded.

In the first of its planned reports,<sup>7</sup> the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) indicated that by the end of the first quarter of 2013:

- 50% of the country was in poverty and 48.8% of people were unemployed;
- Gross Domestic Production (GDP) had declined by 3.7% in 2011, 29% in 2012, and a further 6.8% in the first quarter of 2013;
- The Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>8</sup> for Syria, which was 0.621 in 2005, had declined to 0.473 by 2012, comparable to losing 35 years of progress;
- Financial reserves had fallen from USD 23 billion to USD 2 billion since 2010, the overall budget deficit had risen to 65% of GDP, and inflation between March 2011 to December 2012 had risen by 60%;
- 20% of schools were destroyed or not functioning and 46% of children were no longer regularly attending school.

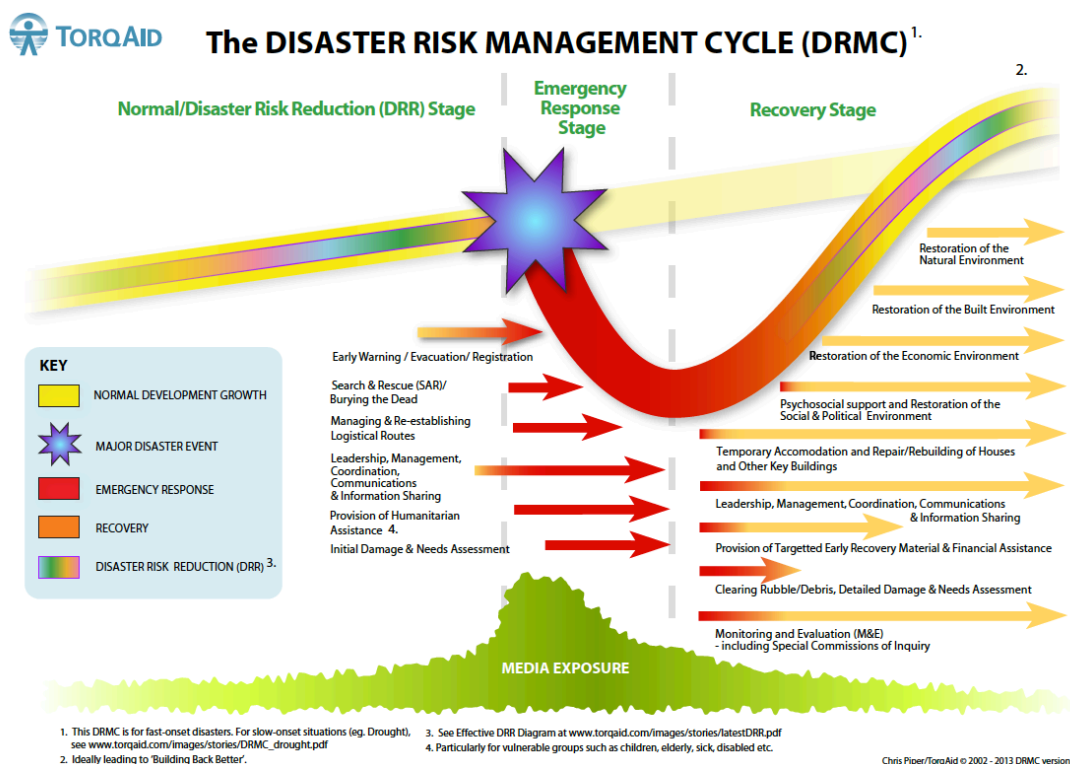
## The Disaster Risk Management Cycle (DRMC)<sup>9</sup>

The DRMC diagram outlines the three main stages through which most medium- to fast-onset disasters pass.<sup>10</sup> A disaster can be described as a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society, involving widespread human, material, economic, or environmental losses and impacts, which

together exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.<sup>11</sup> This is certainly the situation affecting Syria itself, with many of these difficulties now being transferred also to neighbouring countries. The DRMC suggests that there are three main stages in any disaster:

- The Normal/Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Stage
- The Emergency Response Stage
- The Recovery Stage

In the case of natural disasters, especially medium- and fast-onset disasters, the Emergency Response Stage may last only for a few days or weeks before the recovery process commences. In an ongoing conflict situation such as that in Syria, the humanitarian effort is still firmly locked into the Emergency Response Stage, which has been the case since mid 2011. That being said, once there is a peace settlement, the Recovery Stage should begin. It needs to be underscored from the outset that this stage normally lasts much longer than Emergency Response Stage.



## Key activities in the Emergency Response Stage

The key activities mentioned below are those typically carried out in the Emergency Response Stage of a major disaster. Each of them is complicated, however, by the existence of ongoing conflict.

1. Leadership, Management, Coordination, Communications, and Information Sharing
2. Early Warning, Evacuation, and Registration
3. Search & Rescue (SAR) and Burying the Dead
4. Managing and Re-establishing Logistical Routes
5. Provision of Humanitarian Assistance
6. Initial Damage & Needs Assessment

## 1. Leadership, Management, Coordination, Communications, and Information Sharing

The *leadership, management, coordination, communications, and information sharing* functions are all key and complementary factors affecting the success of a humanitarian response. To optimise effectiveness, preparations should be carried out for all of these activities before the response.

Due to the complexity and extent of the conflict-related humanitarian situation in Syria, the overall *leadership and management* of the humanitarian response is taking place in a number of regional centres. Some form of *global humanitarian leadership* is attempted through the efforts of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator<sup>12</sup> and the heads of key UN operational agencies. However, their arguments and pleas for humanitarian compassion and increased funding are regularly undermined by the ongoing conflict and often contradictory political statements and machinations made by the large number of international, regional, and local stakeholders.

Within Syria itself, the host government, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), and the international community continue to try to provide *leadership and management* to efforts to support civilian populations, within the government's area of control. In areas under rebel control, coordination of humanitarian assistance is often lacking.

Because of the complexity of players, overall *regional management* is not currently coordinated through a single integrated Emergency Operations Centre (EOC). Similarly there is no single *communications system* or single common incident management framework<sup>13</sup> in place.

More positively, an effective *information sharing* system, at least at the macro and regional level, has been established through the compilation of reports and studies, coordinated by ReliefWeb. What is more challenging is providing effective *information sharing* for affected people and IDPs within Syria itself as well as for refugees in surrounding countries. The use of social media networks has become an important tool for improving the reach of relevant information in this area.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Early Warning, Evacuation, and Registration

In the case of natural disasters, *early warning* is central,<sup>15</sup> as this allows the host governments and at-risk communities time to make decisions regarding their options. Similarly, the option of *evacuation* often needs to be taken into account when preparing for natural disasters.

In conflict situations, on the other hand, the situation is somewhat different. Families are normally not given an official early warning or any evacuation advice from authorities, and therefore base their decisions on other factors. While most people's preference is to stay in their home area, fear, insecurity, and/or extreme cases of economic necessity may cause them to flee and seek sanctuary as either refugees or IDPs.

*Registration* of affected people is an important component in both large-scale disasters and conflict. In the current situation regarding the large-scale movement of people both within Syria itself, and also the crossing of its borders to neighbouring countries, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies play an enormously important role in registering and re-uniting families.

### 3. Search & Rescue and Burying of the Dead

Over the past couple of years, over 100,000 people have been killed, and an estimated three times this number injured, as a result of conflict in Syria. There is therefore an ongoing process of people carrying out *search and rescue (SAR)* and *burying of the dead* initiatives. Where this takes place within the context of armed conflict, this can sometimes result in normal and accepted religious burial practices not being correctly carried out, which in turn can exacerbate the breakdown of social capital between different ethnic, religious, or clan groups.

### 4. Managing and Re-establishing Logistical Routes

Following a major natural disaster, one of the key priorities is the *management and re-establishment of logistical routes*, particularly as this might relate to both evacuation and bringing in needed humanitarian relief supplies. In conflict situations such as that in Syria, under international humanitarian Law (IHL), all involved stakeholders should allow *unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief*, both for the safe movement of the wounded or sick and for the transport of humanitarian supplies. Unfortunately, there are areas, particularly within Syria itself, where this unimpeded passage is currently not available, including in much of Aleppo and parts of rural Damascus and Homs.

### 5. Provision of Humanitarian Assistance

Following a disaster, the *provision of humanitarian assistance* will involve a multitude of organisations, agencies, and government departments. A major challenge here is the coordination of this humanitarian assistance, to ensure it is used as effectively and efficiently as possible. The enormity of the humanitarian situation in both Syria and surrounding countries, the ongoing conflict and evolving political situation, and the overall shortage of funding leads to an extremely challenging situation for all the key stakeholders involved.

Other key concerns for the humanitarian community at present include the deteriorating health situation in some parts of Syria, the entrapment of civilians between warring factions, the deliberate targeting of civilians and health workers, the need for children to re-engage with their schooling, and the need for humanitarian stakeholders to put into place detailed planning for an effective winterization program.

The *funding* available will be largely determined by a combination of how the disaster is reported in national and international press, and how the international community views the efforts of the host government(s). For Syria itself there is a USD 1.4 billion budget for humanitarian assistance to the affected 6.8 million people,<sup>16</sup> but this is currently only 55% funded. The Regional Refugee Response Plan has a budget for USD 3 billion,<sup>17</sup> but again this is only funded to the tune of 49%.

### 6. Initial Damage & Needs Assessment

As with any humanitarian response, there is a need for *initial damage and needs assessments*. Evaluations of other disasters have suggested that coordinated assessments should be carried out, ideally involving multiple stakeholders and including representatives from the affected communities themselves. The use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) such as satellite technology can greatly assist in damage and needs assessments.

## Looking at the Future: The Recovery Stage

As a disaster moves into the Recovery Stage, several recovery parameters will need to be addressed. Until cessation of hostilities, the recovery process in Syria and surrounding cannot fully get started. It should, however, be mentioned that for a protracted and complex situation as that in Syria, there cannot be a clear division between the Emergency Response Stage and the Recovery Stage. Some general comments can still be made about the Syrian situation.

In transitioning from the Emergency Response to the Recovery Stage, the organisations responsible for *leadership, management, coordination, communications and information sharing* may change. This occurred in Indonesia following the December 2004 tsunami, for example, where the Indonesian Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency (BRR<sup>18</sup>) was mandated by the Government of Indonesia in April 2005 to coordinate recovery initiatives over the following four years. Ideally, some form of overarching framework would also be needed for Syria once the recovery stage begins.

This will also be the time to carry out detailed *damage and needs assessments*. This process should combine a range of stakeholders, including affected community representatives and appropriate technical experts. There will be an ongoing need to *provide targeted early recovery assistance* to affected communities. This challenge should not be underestimated, as this will need to include, at least initially, a large proportion of the 6.8 million affected people within Syria, and many of the likely nearly 2 million returnees. As with any assistance, it will be a challenge to effectively support the affected communities while not creating dependency. Needs assessments will especially needed to target vulnerable stakeholder groups, including the young, the elderly, the infirm or disabled, and disadvantaged minority or other social groups. This latter issue is of particular concern, as the viciousness of the conflict has caused severe strains on the country's social capital.

The *clearing of the rubble and debris* will be a massive task, with large sections of the urban environment in Syria destroyed or damaged by the fighting. Care will be needed to limit the potential loss of life and injuries caused by a highly dangerous mixture of unexploded ordinances, land mines, and booby traps.

The provision of *temporary accommodation and the repair/rebuilding of houses and other buildings* is a complex area, and one which the stakeholders tend to struggle with. Following a comprehensive peace settlement it is likely that IDPs and refugees will attempt to move back to their home areas. However, due to the fact that a large number of dwellings have been destroyed and damaged, it will take a number of years before the majority of people are re-settled in permanent homes. This process is often complicated by legal issues regarding land rights. In the short to medium term, many people may have to live in temporary buildings or camps.

Following a major disaster, the *restoration of the built environment* will be a time-consuming and expensive process. While the re-establishment of telecommunications, power, water, and sewerage services can take weeks or months, the reconstruction of more complex infrastructure such as rebuilding industrial infrastructure and transport networks may well take months or years. This will be an enormous challenge for Syria in the years ahead, and will require substantial amounts of financial support. *Restoring the economic environment* is another key priority in the Recovery Stage, and will require significant financial input from private and public sources.

At the time of writing, the future political and geographic landscape of Syria is hard to predict. Regardless of the outcome of the current crisis, an enormous effort will be required by the key stakeholders to *restore the social and political environment*. The *psychosocial damage* caused to both individuals and communities will also require intensive and widespread counselling and support.

The *restoration of the natural environment* includes safely disposing of debris and dealing with the disaster's effects on the natural environment, in particular river systems and ground water pollution. As a country with a fragile water supply, it will be important to repair and improve the protection of the various water sources that supply Syria, particularly the Euphrates river system, which is also an

important water supply for Turkey and Iraq. Moreover, the repair and protection of cultural heritage sites will also need to be considered.

Ideally, the recovery process should include a range of improved *Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)* initiatives, which will allow the at-risk community to be better prepared to withstand future natural or man-made disasters.

The final parameter of the Recovery Stage is that of *Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)*. While it is relatively easy to report on outputs (which are normally handled through reports), what is more challenging is to both articulate, and then attempt to measure, the outcomes of the recovery process. Following major disasters, there are often evaluations of special commissions of inquiry, which are designed to learn from these events.<sup>19</sup>

In summary, if all these recovery processes are carried out well, this will allow the community in question to “*Build Back Better*”. This should place community members in a stronger position to be more resilient and to respond better to any future disasters.

## A note on the role of media

The final aspect to note in the DRMC diagram is that of *media exposure*. Media attention is strongest during the Emergency Response Stage and tends to tail off during the recovery process. There is generally a strong relationship between media exposure and funding, which can lead to the Emergency Stage generating the majority of financial resources while the majority of expenditure takes place in the Recovery Stage. For Syria, with funding already problematic during the current high-exposure Emergency Response Stage, the funding situation is likely to be even worse in the Recovery Stage.

## Concluding Remarks

This article has illustrated how the DRM diagrammatic framework can be useful for understanding and improving humanitarian responses, even for ongoing and complex humanitarian situations, such as that affecting Syria and the surrounding countries. By using a more generalized framework for the entire DRM cycle, it also becomes possible to think in a more structured way about the future and the challenges that will need to be dealt with once the conflict subsides or ends.

## About the author

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See a two-page summary of these at <http://www.torqaid.com/images/stories/drmframeworkshort.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> This is produced both in English and Arabic. See <http://www.unocha.org/crisis/syria>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

<sup>4</sup> The main repository of humanitarian information relating to any global disaster is Relief Web - [www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int) - and the background information for this paper is largely drawn from that source.

<sup>5</sup> In conflict situations, it is estimated there is a 3:1 ratio of dead:injured people, which suggests a further 300,00 injured or traumatised by the conflict.

<sup>6</sup> This budget covers the period Jan-Dec 2013.

<sup>7</sup> The Syrian Catastrophe: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report, First Quarterly Report Jan-March 2013.

<sup>8</sup> The HDI comprises a mixture of income, education and health statistics.

<sup>9</sup> This can be accessed from the following link: <http://www.torqaid.com/images/stories/latestdrmc.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> The process is somewhat different in slow-onset disasters, such as drought, which are represented in the modified DRMC diagram at <http://www.torqaid.com/images/stories/latestdrmc drought.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> This is the definition as used by CRED (the Brussels-based Centre for Research on the Epidemiology). In order to be entered as a disaster on the EM-DAT, at least one of the following has to be fulfilled: 10 or more people reported killed; 100 people or more reported affected; declaration of state of emergency; call for international assistance.

<sup>12</sup> The HRC on Humanitarian Aid in Syria is Valerie Amos, who is also the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.

<sup>13</sup> Unlike the situation in for example Australia, where the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) has been adopted by all of the major Australian fire and land management agencies, as well as by the Australian Council of State Emergency Services.

<sup>14</sup> A number of useful lessons having being captured in the INFOASID – [www.infoasid.org](http://www.infoasid.org) - agency website.

<sup>15</sup> This mainly works when there is some advance warning given of the hazard, such as floods, storms, heavy rainfall etc. It works less well in the case of earthquakes, where there may be little or no warning.

<sup>16</sup> This figure was calculated from “Government of Syria, UN System, and Other Humanitarian Players, 2013, Revised Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Plan (SHARP), Jan-Dec 2013,” <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Revised%20SHARP...>

<sup>17</sup> This was similarly developed from the ‘UNHCR, 2013, Syria. Regional Response Plan’, covering Jan-Dec 2013 <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20Regiona...>

<sup>18</sup> BRR being the Bahasa Indonesian acronym for the Badan Rahabilitasi dan Rekanstruksi).

<sup>19</sup> Thus following major global disasters, there are invariably a series of evaluations undertaken, for example for the Indian Ocean tsunami (ALNAP); the Haiti earthquake (IASC); and the 2010-2012 Somalia famine (DARA).